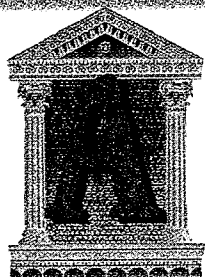


# 4 The Olympic Games



**Sports Obsession** Athens and Sparta were not the only Greek city-states that had trouble getting along. There were lots of feuds and fights among the city-states. However, the Greeks did manage to lay their quarrels aside for a few things, and one of those things was sports.

One of the most famous athletic competitions was held in the city of Olympia, not far from Sparta. Every fourth year the Olympic Games would be held. Several months before the games began, a sacred engraved disk—the emblem of the games—was carried to all the Greek city-states that were expected to compete. The messenger who brought the disk would inform everyone when the games would be held. The messenger would also explain the terms of the Olympic **truce**. The city-states agreed to stop fighting during the time it took for athletes to travel to Olympia, attend the games, and return home again. This took one to three months.

## In the Beginning

The Olympic Games actually began as part of a religious festival in honor of Zeus. The festival originally included processions and religious ceremonies. In 776 B.C. a footrace was added. Contestants ran the length of the stadium, about 200 yards. Later, additional events were added, and the Olympic Games became a regular event.

The official prize for winning an athletic event at the Olympics was a wreath of olive leaves, which was placed on the head of the victor. But the real prize was honor. A victorious athlete would almost certainly become a hero in his native city-state. He might even be immortalized in songs or sculptures.

An interesting fact about the early Olympics is that the competitors generally dressed as the Athenians did in their gymnasiums, which is to say they wore no clothing at all—not even shoes! The Greeks did not mind a little nudity, and the runners didn't want to be slowed down by clothing.

As for the spectators, they sat on the sloping hillsides near the stadium, watching and cheering for their favorite athletes. But only

free males and unmarried priestesses were allowed to watch. Slaves and other women who were caught looking could be put to death.

Greek citizens came to the games from all parts of the known world. Like modern sports fans, they came to marvel at athletic excellence and experience the thrill of victory. They cheered for the athletes of their own city-state but also for skillful athletes from other city-states.

## Early Athletic Events

Most of the original athletic contests were based on the physical skills that the ancient Greeks needed for survival. Since there were many wars, it was important that Greek men learn to throw the javelin (a kind of spear), run quickly, wrestle well, and ride a horse.

At least two of the early Olympic events involved throwing the javelin. In one competition, athletes threw the javelin for distance; in another they threw for accuracy. In this last event it appears that competitors had to throw the javelin at a target while galloping past on a horse. This required strength, balance, and coordination.

Another event was the discus throw. The discus was shaped a bit like a Frisbee, but it was made of stone, iron, lead, or bronze. Each discus weighed about 14 pounds. Throwing a discus

### vocabulary

**truce** an agreement where two or more people agree to stop fighting

demanded that the athlete hold it tucked in his hand, swing it back and then forward, and release it at just the right time. Athletes competed to see who could throw the discus the farthest.

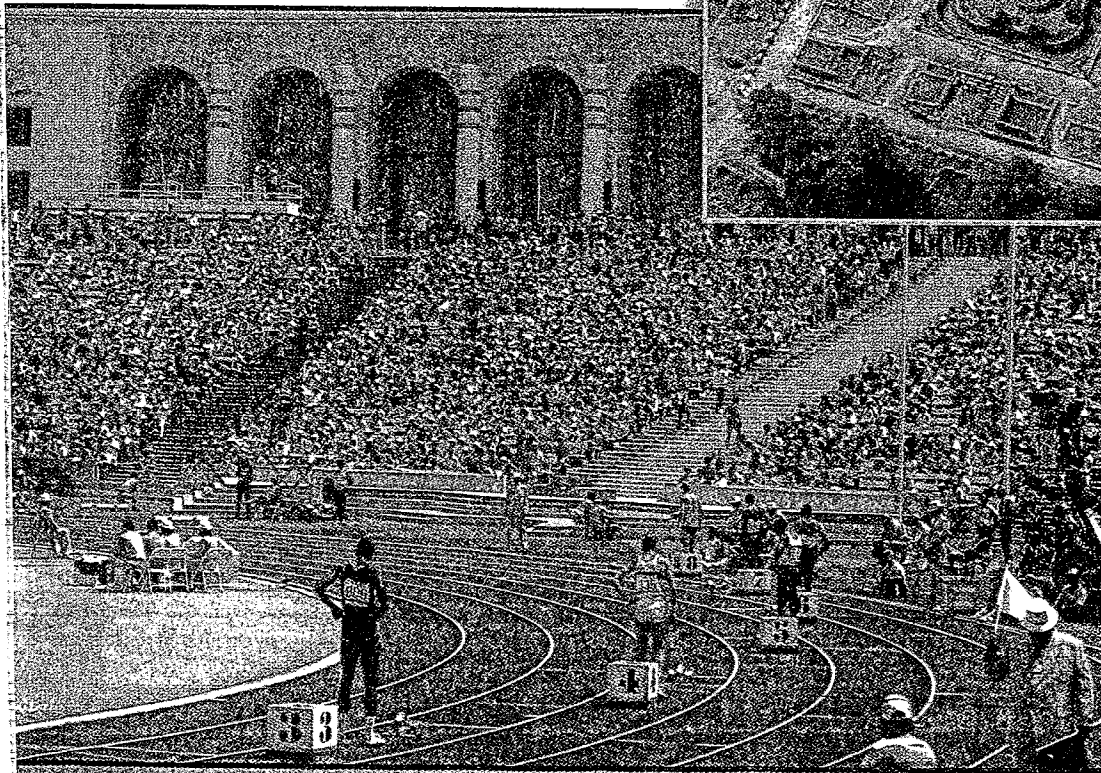
The long jump was meant to see who could jump the farthest. Unlike today's long jump, the ancient Greek athletic event involved carrying weights while jumping. The weights were made of stone or metal. They were shaped like dumbbells and weighed 4 to 8 pounds.

The pentathlon consisted of five events: discus, javelin, long jump, wrestling, and a 200-yard footrace.

The pankration (pahn KRAH tee awn) was a kind of wrestling event that had no rules, except that biting and sticking your fingers into your opponent's eyes were not allowed. Competitors were allowed to twist arms, throw punches, and generally beat up on their opponents.

Many different kinds of foot races were held. In addition to the 200-yard race, there was a 400-yard race and another competition in which competitors had to run 400 yards while wearing helmets and shin guards and carrying a shield.

*The modern Olympic Games carry on traditions that began almost 3,000 years ago.*



## Down Through the Ages

The Olympic Games continued for centuries, even through much of the time that the Roman Empire ruled Greece. Finally, in A.D. 393, after more than a thousand years of competition, the Roman emperor Theodosius I (thee oh DOH shee us) canceled the games. He was a Christian and did not like the religious rites in honor of Zeus that were still a part of the Olympics.

It was not until the late nineteenth century that the games were begun again. The first of the modern Olympic Games were held in 1896, in a new stadium built in Athens. Ever since, the Olympics have been held every four years, except during World War I and World War II. Nowadays, people from all over the world participate. The modern games include many more events than the ancient games, but the ancient Greek love of physical fitness, skill, and courage lives on in today's Olympics.

*These ruins in Olympia, Greece are where the ancient Olympic Games were held.*

